

THE NIGHTINGALE AND THE ROSEⁱ

"She said that she would dance with me if I brought her red roses," cried the young Student; "but in all my garden there is no red rose."

From her nest in the holm-oak treeⁱⁱ the Nightingale heard him, and she looked out through the leaves, and wondered.

"No red rose in all my garden!" he cried, and his beautiful eyes filled with tears. "Ah, on what little things does happiness depend! I have read all that the wise men have written, and all the secrets of philosophy are mine, yet for [end of 27] want of a red rose is my life made wretched."

"Here at last is a true lover," said the Nightingale. "Night after night have I sung of him, though I knew him not: night after night have I told his story to the stars, and now I see him. His hair is dark as the hyacinth-blossom,ⁱⁱⁱ and his lips are red as the rose of his desire; but passion has made his face like pale ivory, and sorrow has set her seal upon his brow."

"The Prince gives a ball to-morrow night," murmured the young Student, "and my love will be of the company. If I bring her a red rose she will dance with me till dawn. If I bring her a red rose, I shall hold her in my arms, and she will lean her head upon my shoulder, and her hand will be clasped in mine. But there is no red rose in my garden, so I shall sit lonely, and she will pass me by. She will have no heed of me, and my heart will break." [end of 28]

"Here indeed is the true lover," said the Nightingale. "What I sing of, he suffers--what is joy to me, to him is pain. Surely Love is a wonderful thing. It is more precious than emeralds, and dearer than fine opals. Pearls and pomegranates cannot buy it, nor is it set forth in the marketplace. It may not be purchased of the merchants, nor can it be weighed out in the balance for gold."^{iv}

"The musicians will sit in their gallery," said the young Student, "and play upon their stringed instruments, and my love will dance to the sound of the harp and the violin. She will dance so lightly that her feet will not touch the floor, and the courtiers in their gay dresses will throng round her. But with me she will not dance, for I have no red rose to give her"; and he flung himself down on the grass, and buried his face in his hands, and wept.

"Why is he weeping?" asked a little Green [end of 29] Lizard, as he ran past him with his tail in the air.

"Why, indeed?" said a Butterfly, who was fluttering about after a sunbeam.

"Why, indeed?" whispered a Daisy to his neighbour, in a soft, low voice.

"He is weeping for a red rose," said the Nightingale.

"For a red rose?" they cried; "how very ridiculous!" and the little Lizard, who was something of a cynic, laughed outright.

But the Nightingale understood the secret of the Student's sorrow, and she sat silent in the oak-tree, and thought about the mystery of Love.

Suddenly she spread her brown wings for flight, and soared into the air. She passed through the grove like a shadow, and like a shadow she sailed across the garden.

In the centre of the grass-plot^v was standing a beautiful Rose-tree,^{vi} and when she saw it she flew over to it, and lit upon a spray. [end of 30]

"Give me a red rose," she cried, "and I will sing you my sweetest song."^{vii}

But the Tree shook its head.

"My roses are white," it answered; "as white as the foam of the sea, and whiter than the snow upon the mountain. But go to my brother who grows round the old sun-dial, and perhaps he will give you what you want."

So the Nightingale flew over to the Rose-[end of 31]tree that was growing round the old sun-dial.

"Give me a red rose," she cried, "and I will sing you my sweetest song."

But the Tree shook its head.

"My roses are yellow," it answered; "as yellow as the hair of the mermaiden who sits upon an amber throne, and yellower than the daffodil that blooms in the meadow before the mower comes with his scythe. But go to my brother who grows beneath the Student's window, and perhaps he will give you what you want."

So the Nightingale flew over to the Rose-tree that was growing beneath the Student's window.

"Give me a red rose," she cried, "and I will sing you my sweetest song."

But the Tree shook its head.

"My roses are red," it answered, "as red as the feet of the dove, and redder than the great fans of coral that wave and wave in the ocean-cavern. But the winter has chilled my veins, and the frost has nipped my buds, and the storm has broken my branches, and I shall have no roses at all this year."^{viii}

"One red rose is all I want," cried the Nightingale, "only one red rose! Is there no way by which I can get it?"

"There is away," answered the Tree; "but it is so terrible that I dare not tell it to you."

"Tell it to me," said the Nightingale, "I am not afraid."

"If you want a red rose," said the Tree, "you must build it out of music by moonlight, and stain it with your own heart's-blood. [end of 32] You must sing to me with your breast against a thorn. All night long you must sing to me, and the thorn must pierce your heart, and your life-blood must flow into my veins, and become mine."^{ix}

"Death is a great price to pay for a red rose," cried the Nightingale, "and Life is very dear to all. It is pleasant to sit in the green wood, and to watch the Sun in his chariot of gold, and the Moon in her chariot of pearl. Sweet is the scent of the hawthorn, and sweet are the bluebells that hide in the valley, and the heather that blows on the hill. Yet Love is better than Life, and what is the heart of a bird compared to the heart of a man?"^x

So she spread her brown wings for flight, and soared into the air. She swept over the garden like a shadow, and like a shadow she sailed through the grove.

The young Student was still lying on the grass, where she had left him, and the tears were not yet dry in his beautiful eyes. [end of 33]

"Be happy," cried the Nightingale, "be happy; you shall have your red rose. I will build it out of music by moonlight, and stain it with my own heart's-blood. All that I ask of you in return is that you will be a true lover, for Love is wiser than Philosophy, though she is wise, and mightier than Power, though he is mighty. Flame- coloured are his wings, and coloured like flame is his body. His lips are sweet as honey, and his breath is like frankincense."

The Student looked up from the grass, and listened, but he could not understand what the Nightingale was saying to him, for he only knew the things that are written down in books.^{xi}

But the Oak-tree understood, and felt sad, for he was very fond of the little Nightingale who had built her nest in his branches.

"Sing me one last song," he whispered; "I shall feel very lonely when you are gone." [end of 34]

So the Nightingale sang to the Oak-tree, and her voice was like water bubbling from a silver jar.^{xii}

When she had finished her song the Student got up, and pulled a note-book and a lead-pencil out of his pocket.

"She has form," he said to himself, as he walked away through the grove--"that cannot be denied to her; but has she got feeling? I am afraid not. In fact, she is like most artists; she is all style, without any sincerity. She would not sacrifice herself for others. She thinks merely of music, and everybody knows that the arts are selfish. Still, it must be admitted that she has some beautiful notes in her voice. What a pity it is that they do not mean anything, or do any practical good."^{xiii} And he went into his room, and lay down on his little pallet-bed, and began to think of his love; and, after a time, he fell asleep.

And when the Moon shone in the heavens [end of 35] the Nightingale flew to the Rose-tree, and set her breast against the thorn. All night long she sang with her breast against the thorn, and the cold crystal Moon leaned down and listened. All night long she sang, and the thorn went deeper and deeper into her breast, and her life-blood ebbed away from her.

She sang first of the birth of love in the heart of a boy and a girl. And on the top-most spray of the Rose-tree there blossomed a marvellous rose, petal following petal, as song followed song. Pale was it, at first, as the mist that hangs over the river--pale as the feet of the morning, and silver as the wings of the dawn. As the shadow of a rose in a mirror of silver, as the shadow of a rose in a water-pool, so was the rose that blossomed on the topmost spray of the Tree.

But the Tree cried to the Nightingale to press closer against the thorn. "Press closer, little Nightingale," cried the Tree, [end of 36] "or the Day will come before the rose is finished."

So the Nightingale pressed closer against the thorn, and louder and louder grew her song, for she sang of the birth of passion in the soul of a man and a maid.

And a delicate flush of pink came into the leaves of the rose, like the flush in the face of the bridegroom when he kisses the lips of the bride.^{xiv} But the thorn had not yet reached her heart, so the rose's heart remained white, for only a Nightingale's heart's-blood can crimson the heart of a rose.

And the Tree cried to the Nightingale to press closer against the thorn. "Press closer, little Nightingale," cried the Tree, "or the Day will come before the rose is finished."

So the Nightingale pressed closer against the thorn, and the thorn touched her heart, and a fierce pang of pain shot through her. Bitter, bitter was the pain, and wilder and [end of 37] wilder grew her song, for she sang of the Love that is perfected by Death, of the Love that dies not in the tomb.^{xv}

And the marvellous rose became crimson, like the rose of the eastern sky. Crimson was the girdle of petals, and crimson as a ruby was the heart.

But the Nightingale's voice grew fainter, and her little wings began to beat, and a film came over her eyes. Fainter and fainter grew her song, and she felt something choking her in her throat.

Then she gave one last burst of music. The white Moon heard it, and she forgot the dawn, and lingered on in the sky. The red rose heard it, and it trembled all over with ecstasy, and opened its petals to the cold morning air. Echo bore it to her purple cavern in the hills, and woke the sleeping shepherds from their dreams. It floated through the reeds of the river, and they carried its message to the sea. [end of 38]

"Look, look!" cried the Tree, "the rose is finished now"; but the Nightingale made no answer, for she was lying dead in the long grass, with the thorn in her heart.

And at noon the Student opened his window and looked out.

"Why, what a wonderful piece of luck!" he cried; "here is a red rose! I have never seen any rose like it in all my life. It is so beautiful that I am sure it has a long Latin name"; and he leaned down and plucked it.

Then he put on his hat, and ran up to the Professor's house with the rose in his hand.

The daughter of the Professor was sitting in the doorway winding blue silk on a reel, and her little dog was lying at her feet.

"You said that you would dance with me if I brought you a red rose," cried the Student. "Here is the reddest rose in all the world. You will wear it to-night next your heart, and as we dance together it will tell you how I love you." [end of 39]

But the girl frowned.

"I am afraid it will not go with my dress," she answered; "and, besides, the Chamberlain's nephew has sent me some real jewels, and everybody knows that jewels cost far more than flowers."^{xvi}

"Well, upon my word, you are very ungrateful," said the Student angrily; and he threw the rose into the street, where it fell into the gutter, and a cart-wheel went over it.^{xvii}

"Ungrateful!" said the girl. "I tell you what, you are very rude; and, after all, who are you? Only a Student. Why, I don't believe you have even got silver buckles to your shoes as the Chamberlain's nephew has"; and she got up from her chair and went into the house.

"What a silly thing Love is," said the Student as he walked away. "It is not half as useful as Logic, for it does not prove anything, and it is always telling one of things [end of 40] that are not going to happen, and making one believe things that are not true. In fact, it is quite unpractical, and, as in this age to be practical is everything,^{xviii} I shall go back to Philosophy and study Metaphysics."

So he returned to his room and pulled out a great dusty book, and began to read.

ⁱ The nightingale and the rose are both icons of romantic sensibility; John Keats' (1795-1821) "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819) celebrates the Nightingale and its song as an embodiment of fancy, an inspiration of the imagination; the poem also invokes the pleasure and peace of "easeful Death" (l. 52) and contrasts the pleasures of escape into fancy (albeit temporary) with the disappointments and pain of everyday life.

When in Rome in 1877, Wilde visited Keats' grave and wrote a short essay and poem about the experience. In both essay and poem, Wilde compares Keats with St. Sebastian, a beautiful youth pierced by the arrows of life, and yet sublimely conscious of ideal beauty: "As I stood beside the mean grave of this divine boy, I thought of him as of a Priest of Beauty slain before his time; and the vision of Guido's St. Sebastian came before my eyes as I saw him at Genoa, a lovely brown boy, with crisp, clustering hair and red lips, bound by his evil enemies to a tree, and though pierced by arrows, raising his eyes with divine, impassioned gaze towards the Eternal Beauty of the opening heavens" (*Irish Monthly* July 1877, *Miscellanies* 3-4).



Hans Christian Andersen (1805-75) used a nightingale as a protagonist in two tales contrasting instinctive, natural beauty with artificial, mechanical beauty. In "The Nightingale" (1843), the humble bird first charms the Chinese Emperor and then is dethroned by a jeweled replica with only one song; but when the Emperor lies desperately ill, the real nightingale returns to sooth his terrors and defy death. In "The Swineherd" (1841), a poor prince of an insignificant kingdom woos the daughter of the Emperor with a beautiful Rose and a divinely singing Nightingale. She rejects his suit on the grounds that neither is artificial. The prince proceeds to teach the princess a hard (and rather sadistic) lesson about her superficiality.

The myth of Philomena, who was transformed into a nightingale after her rape and mutilation by her brother-in-law, also has connections with this story and the previous one,

as her sister Procne is transformed into a swallow. Jarlath Killeen glosses the connections between Wilde's tales, the Greek myths, and the use that Christians made of them (2007 44ff).

ⁱⁱ *Quercus ilex*, the Holm Oak or Holly Oak is a large evergreen oak native to the Mediterranean region. It takes its name from holm, an ancient name for holly, and has spiny leaves. Like the Nightingale (*Luscinia megarhynchos*) itself, the leaves have pale undersides. We are being prepared for the later thorn piercing.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hyacinthus, a youth beloved by Apollo and accidentally killed by him; Apollo caused a flower to grow from the dead youth's blood. By 1894, another flower, "Narcissus," was "a code word for attractive young men in gay circles" (Duffy 2001 337). However, the letter to Lord Alfred "Bosie" Douglas that contributed towards Wilde's conviction read, in part, "I know Hyacinthus, whom Apollo loved so madly, was you in Greek days" (Ellmann 367, n.).

^{iv} The Nightingale is the true Romantic who values the sublime emotions of love and sorrow more than material objects such as jewels. The Rose-Tree and the other personified characters employ a kind of incantatory parallelism that raises its discourse to a quasi-religious level. Biblical poetry develops its patterns of imagery by pairing lines in syntactically equivalent yet contrasting ways: for example, from the Song of Songs 2:15, "O my dove, that art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs, Let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; For sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely" (AV). Wilde's series of intensifying similes and comparisons also recall biblical modes; for example, in Psalm 19:10, the precepts of the Lord are "more to be desired . . . than gold, yea, than much fine gold: Sweeter also than honey and the honey-comb" (AV). Like Wilde's Nightingale, the speaker of the Song of Songs values love above all: "If a man would give all the substance of his house for love, It would be utterly condemned" (8:7b). For a fuller description of biblical poetic devices, see Berlin 1993 597-99.

^v OED: "A piece of ground covered with turf, sometimes having ornamental flower-beds upon it."

^{vi} OED: "A rose-bush." The choice of "tree" as the noun reinforces connections between the sacrificial love of the nightingale and that of Jesus Christ.

^{vii} The nightingale sings about love as a sanctified non-commodity, and yet she offers to sing in exchange for the symbol of love.

^{viii} The fairy-tale convention of the quest involving three attempts pertains here; ironically, however, the success of the quest demands the protagonist's death.

^{ix} Also in the fairy-tale tradition, particularly in the literary fairy-tales of the Romantic era and forward, the object so greatly desired comes at tremendous cost. See, for example, Andersen's "Little Mermaid" (1837), who must give up her tongue and experience continual, knifelike pain in her feet in order to have legs and the chance to win the Prince's love and an immortal soul. Unusually, the Nightingale desires this boon not for herself, but for the Student.

^x The story answers the Nightingale's rhetorical question differently than she appears to.

^{xi} The student's incomprehension of the Nightingale's motives and actions continues through the end of the tale. As Wilde wrote to Thomas Hutchinson (7 May 1888), "I am afraid that I don't think as much of the young Student as you do. He seems to me a rather shallow young man, and almost as bad as the girl he thinks he loves. The nightingale is the true lover, if there is one. She, at least, is Romance, and the Student and the girl are, like most of us, unworthy

of Romance" (*Letters* 218). Yet, ironically, the existence of this book suggests that it might be possible to learn of true love from their pages--albeit not from the pages of the student's favorite philosophy and metaphysics.

xii This simile, like others, stresses an aesthetic union between natural and made objects, each enhancing the other.

xiii The student's emphasis here, and elsewhere, on the practicality he reads about in books, underscores his fundamentally unpoetic--and unlovely, unloverlike--nature.

xiv ...but in divine

High piping Pelevi, with "Wine! Wine! Wine!
Red Wine!"--the Nightingale cries to the Rose
That yellow Cheek of hers to incarnadine.

The Rubaiyyat of Omar Khayyam.

xv The Nightingale here suggests Christ in her voluntary sacrifice of life for the love of another. The evocation of Christ's sacrifice makes this garden resemble the garden of Gethsemane as the setting where the final resolve was reached to carry through with the sacrifice. Moreover, as John-Charles Duffy argues, as the third movement of the Nightingale's song (the first two depicting the love between male and female), this one

abandons these categories [of heterosexual love], and thus conspicuously omits heterosexuality from its conception of the final, or highest, Love. That is to say, while the song does not explicitly advocate the view . . . that male love is the highest form of love. . ., it certainly leaves the way open to their view. Indeed, when the heterosexual love portrayed in this tale--that between the Student and the Professor's daughter--proves a farce, Wilde leaves plenty of room to argue that Kains-Jackson and Carpenter [who argue for the superiority of male-male love] carry the day. (Duffy 2001 332)

Duffy notes that the eroticized penetration of the nightingale by the thorn is non-reproductive yet sanctified, "a supreme gesture of self-sacrificing love" (2001 334).

Guy Willoughby points out that while the Nightingale sacrifices her life, she does not as a result redeem anything--she creates beauty: "Wilde's story of the Nightingale is an allegory for the all-consuming love and commitment required of Christ's most notable imitator, the artist" (Guy Willoughby, 'The Marvellous Rose: Christ and the Meaning of Art in 'The Nightingale and the Rose',' *English Studies in Africa* 31.2 [1988]: 107-17).

xvi The girl recalls the Emperor's Daughter of Andersen's "The Swine-Herd," who can only value what is made and artificial rather than what is natural and sublime. Yet, unlike Andersen, Wilde values the ruby as a natural object, since the completed rose is compared to one.

xvii This extraordinarily disappointing outcome to the Nightingale's supreme sacrifice--in contrast with God's validation of the Happy Prince and the Swallow--raises questions about poetic justice and anticipates the anticlimaxes of "The Devoted Friend" and "The Remarkable Rocket."

xviii "In this age, to be practical is everything." The student reveals himself to be a philistine rather than a lover, although his choice of subjects ironically points to his impracticality nonetheless. Duffy calls the student's conclusion "quintessentially Victorian" (334).

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